

SUDAN IN CRISIS

**Improving the Response for Sudanese
Refugees in Egypt**

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About Refugees International

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.

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Executive Summary

The outbreak of fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan on April 15 has led to massive displacement and a humanitarian crisis inside Sudan and its neighboring countries. An estimated 3 million Sudanese have been displaced, with almost 2.5 million displaced internally. The rest have fled their homes to surrounding countries. At least 250,000 people have sought refuge in Egypt, and another 120,000 are stuck on the Sudan side of the border awaiting entry.

New arrivals to Egypt recount an arduous journey. They described difficulties in finding transport, exorbitant fares, and unpredictable checkpoints. At the border crossing, they face long waits, unsanitary conditions, entry restrictions based on age and sex, visa backlogs, and a lack of necessities and services. The situation is particularly dire at the border town of Wadi Halfa—a city in the Northern state of Sudan near the border with Egypt. Thousands of new arrivals are stranded for weeks waiting for Egyptian authorities to issue them visas or for Sudanese authorities to issue them travel documents.

Due to long wait times to get visas, many families opt to send women, children, and elderly members ahead, splitting up families for uncertain periods. On June 10, Egypt further tightened its entry requirements by announcing that all Sudanese citizens must obtain visas from the Egyptian consular office in Wadi Halfa or Port Sudan before crossing the border. According to the Egyptian authorities, the move was to counter the forgery of visas and better manage Sudanese refugees' entry into Egypt. The decision reverses a longstanding exemption granted to children, women, and elderly men.

The new refugees join thousands of previously arrived Sudanese in a historically less-than-welcoming environment in Egypt. Sudanese refugees who arrived in previous years describe government policy and broader societal discrimination that has made living in Egypt difficult. Most refugees live in poor, unsafe neighborhoods where sanitary services are lacking, relying on Sudanese-led refugee organizations and mutual aid associations. These local organizations are, however, struggling with the enormous demands for their services.

Without a unified asylum law, the Egyptian government has tasked the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) with the primary responsibility of registering, documenting, and resettling refugees. But relations between UNHCR and the Sudanese refugees are tense and sometimes hostile because of the frustrations with the massive backlog in registrations and Refugee Service Determinations (RSDs).

Three months into the Sudanese conflict, the parties continue to breach ceasefires, and diplomatic and political efforts to resolve the conflict through negotiations have not yielded fruit. The conflict is spreading to other parts of the country. As a result, more people will flee Sudan to neighboring countries, including Egypt. With the support of UNHCR and donors, Egypt should allow people fleeing Sudan into the country, in line with its domestic laws, agreements with Sudan, and the Refugee Conventions, to which Egypt is a signatory. Egypt should ease or lift requirements currently in place for Sudanese seeking entry, ease or waive requirements for those who remain in Egypt, and expedite granting refugee status to those who wish to have it. Donors should fund the UNHCR to increase its capacity to meet the increasing demand.

Recommendations

To the Egyptian government:

- Lift or ease requirements for Sudanese to enter the country in accordance with the recognition that they are de facto refugees.
- Grant Sudanese refugees prima facie refugee status to enter and remain in Egypt without requiring time-consuming Refugee Status Determinations (RSDs). Prima facie status is granted based on the objective evaluation of circumstances in the country of origin, including generalized violence in the case of Sudan following the conflict. While it can be used for individual RSDs, it is used chiefly for groups because individual determination is unnecessary and impractical.
- To safeguard family unity, offer Derivative Refugee Status to the families, spouses, and relatives separated by war and Egypt's stringent entry requirements. Egypt's policy of requiring entry visas for men between 16-50 has separated families. Allowing Sudanese stuck at the border to have refugee status through their families who have already been granted refuge will ease the congestion at the border.
- For Sudanese already in Egypt whose refugee status was denied, re-open their files, and use the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspect of Refugee Problems in Africa. This Convention offers a more expansive definition of a refugee than the UN Refugee Convention, particularly the standard regarding "events seriously disturbing public order." By moving away from an individual situation or a "well-founded fear of persecution," and instead focusing on events and circumstances that seriously "disturb public order" in a refugee's country of origin, including widespread human rights abuse and generalized violence, the OAU Convention expands circumstances under which refugees are protected.
- The Egyptian government should reform its current law that allows the government to approve or deny whether an NGO can receive funding during a 60-day period in which the funds cannot be spent, creating a massive inconvenience for NGOs seeking funding to provide services to refugee populations.

To donors:

- Fund local Sudanese-led mutual aid and refugee organizations in Egypt. These organizations provide Sudanese refugees with critical assistance, including housing, food, health, education, and psychosocial support.
- Increase UNHCR funding to clear the backlog of cases and offer protection to new arrivals. Halfway through 2023, UNHCR had not received even 30 percent of its funding for this year, hamstringing the agency at a time when thousands of Sudanese refugees are arriving in Egypt.
- Fund the NGOs providing humanitarian aid to Sudanese refugees near the border so that they can scale up their operation to complement Egyptian Red Cross and other UN agency efforts.

To UNHCR:

- Urge the government of Egypt to grant prima facie refugee status to Sudanese fleeing conflict.
- Increase capacity to address the backlog of registration and status determinations for refugees in Egypt.

Research Overview

Refugees International traveled to Egypt in May 2023 to assess the humanitarian response to the Sudanese conflict and explore policy solutions. The team, including a consultant and a Sudanese research assistant, visited Cairo and the Egyptian border city of Aswan. This report is informed by dozens of in-person and phone interviews with representatives of UN agencies, newly arrived refugees, refugee-led organizations, and local and international non-governmental organizations providing humanitarian assistance to the Sudanese refugees crossing the border into Egypt.

A Brief on the Conflict

A wave of mass protests in Sudan that began on December 19, 2018, led to the end of the 30-year reign of General Omar el-Bashir. General Abdelfattah al-Burhan, Sudanese army General and the de facto leader of Sudan, and General Mohamed “Hemedti” Hamdan Dagalo, the leader of the dreaded Janjaweed,¹ –accused of committing genocide in Darfur–sided with the protestors. Janjaweed was a precursor to the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), now fighting with the Sudanese Armed Forces. They sided with the protestors and later served as the Chair and Deputy of the Sovereign Council—the governing body of Sudan during the transitional period. But, before the end of the transition period, on [October 25, 2021](#), the two orchestrated a coup against the civilian government headed by Prime Minister Abdullahi Hamdok. After the coup, Burhan became the de facto Head of State with Dagalo as his deputy, thus upending a fragile transition to civilian rule.

Even when they were on the same page, relations between the two military leaders were never settled. The rift grew, mainly as Hemedti’s RSF gained power and resources. They disagreed over security sector reform, particularly the absorption of the RSF into the regular army according to the Framework Agreement² signed on [December 5, 2022](#), between the Sudanese military and the civilians. The Agreement was backed by the United Nations, African Union, Inter-Governmental Authority on Development, and various governments to revive the transition to civilian rule. Al-Burhan wanted the RSF integrated into the army within two years, while Dagalo wanted the process to take 10 years. Months of simmering tension blew into a total conflict when the RSF amassed large-scale troops near Merowe airport. Fighting began in Khartoum on the morning of April 15 and quickly spread.

1 The Janjaweed were accused of committing genocide during the Darfur conflict in 2003-2020

2 “...a framework agreement between the military and a coalition of major civilian actors could restore civilian rule in Sudan and give the country another chance to chart a path out of decades of authoritarian rule”< <https://www.crisis-group.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan-rebooting-an-endangered-transition> >

Inside Sudan

New Sudanese refugees in Aswan and Cairo told Refugees International about violence, forceful displacement from their homes, and a lack of essential services, including electricity and banking services, which drove them to search for safety and security. Bus companies charge exorbitant amounts of money to transport them, and many experience difficulties crossing the border after long bus drives, including long wait times. Families were sometimes separated because they did not have the required travel documents.

Initially concentrated in Khartoum, the conflict has spread to other regions like Darfur, North Darfur, North Kordofan, South Darfur, and Kassala, with el-Geneina as the epicenter.

The fighting and resulting humanitarian needs are driving people to flee.

As one recently arrived Sudanese refugee described to Refugees International, people live in fear.

According to the Mixed Migration Center, “As of June 20, approximately 1,965,946 Sudanese are displaced internally, and 598,883 Sudanese nationals, refugees, migrants, and returnees have crossed into Sudan’s neighboring countries. This represents nearly a six-fold increase in displacement since [early May](#).” According to the UNHCR, as of June 19, more than [250,000](#) Sudanese have fled to Egypt.

The outbreak of conflict has exacerbated the humanitarian situation in Sudan. Even before the mid-April conflict, Sudan faced massive humanitarian challenges, with an estimated 15.8 million people – about a third of the population – needing humanitarian assistance in 2023. Since the start of the conflict, that number has increased to [24.7](#) million. The conflict has disrupted the May to October planting season, and there is a likelihood of increased food insecurity across the country. According to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FewsNet)³, “areas of greatest concern include the epicenters of conflict in Khartoum and West Darfur, along with rural areas of greater Darfur and greater Kordofan where the household capacity to cope with sharply rising food prices in the absence of external assistance is [very limited](#).”

3 A leading provider of early warning and analysis on food insecurity around the world.

Three things make humanitarian aid delivery difficult, thus causing people to flee the country. First, conflict threatens the safety and security of people in need and humanitarian workers delivering aid. Despite signing multiple ceasefire agreements, including the Short-Term Ceasefire and Humanitarian Arrangement of May 20, parties to the conflict have continued to fight in Khartoum and other parts of the country.

Second, aid delivery is complicated as the combatants – especially the RSF – have targeted health workers and facilities. Since the start of the conflict, [WHO has verified](#) “46 attacks on health workers and facilities which have killed eight people and injured 18 others...67% of hospitals in areas affected by fighting are closed, and several maternity hospitals are out of action, including Omdurman Hospital, the largest referral hospital in Sudan.” Sudan’s health system struggled before the conflict due to 20 years of sanctions and chronic underfunding. This has led to poor health outcomes, including a high infant mortality rate ([38 deaths per 1,000 live births](#)), high maternal mortality rate (295 deaths per 100,000 live births), and low life expectancy (66 years). 134 of Sudan’s 820 hospitals are located in Khartoum. As a result, the concentration of fighting in the capital is having an outsized effect on healthcare provision, as [70 percent](#) of hospitals in Khartoum are no longer functional.

Third, the near collapse of the banking system makes it difficult for people to withdraw or receive money outside of Sudan. The central bank was set [ablaze](#), local commercial banks closed, and ATMs were not functioning, leaving people without access to cash and financial assets. Internet connectivity has been severely disrupted, operating at only [44 percent capacity](#). The only way people send and receive money is through a mobile app, [Bankak](#), which can be unsteady sometimes.

Preferred Destination

Egypt's longstanding historical and geographical connections with Sudan make it a primary destination for many Sudanese, particularly those coming from central and northern parts of the country. Egypt has hosted Sudanese refugees for decades and was already hosting nearly **60,000** Sudanese before the conflict, according to UNHCR. This does not include many unregistered Sudanese or many more who go to Egypt for their medical needs, education, or investments and property in Egypt.

Cycles of conflict since its independence have been the significant driver of Sudanese seeking refuge in Egypt. There have been three major waves of Sudanese refugees coming to Egypt. The first wave was during the Sudanese first civil war, which started in **1955** and ended in 1972. The second wave was during the Sudanese second civil war, which broke out in 1983 and lasted for 22 years until the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the Sudanese government was signed in **2005**. And the third phase was the Darfur conflict, which started in **2003**.

In **2004**, Egypt and Sudan signed the Four-Freedoms Agreement. The agreement guarantees mutual freedom of movement, residency without a permit, work, and property ownership. Citizens of the two countries do not need visas to enter and exit the respective countries. Despite the agreement, relations between the two countries have ebbed and flowed, and with them, the treatment of **Sudanese refugees**. Sudanese authorities have accused Egypt of never **fully implementing** the Four Freedoms Agreement. Egypt's full observation of the agreement would ease Sudanese refugees' entry into Egypt since they would not require a visa at the port of entry.

The first wave of Sudanese refugees crossing the border after the conflict broke out in 2023 included people with means. Some rented flats in Egypt, others owned properties in Egypt, and others also had more than one passport—they arrived in Egypt en route to Europe or other destinations. Now, increasingly, those coming are people with limited means. Some could not even afford the bus ticket.

"When Asma, her three children, and her elderly mother arrived in the southern Egypt city of Aswan after a three-day bus journey from Omdurman, Sudan, they had no money or place to go. They were forced out of their home by gunmen. They lived in a market for 10 days, dodging bullets until they found a bus driver who drove them but forced them to sit on the bus floor because they had no money. "The driver humiliated us publicly," the grandmother recalled, fighting back tears. While the war was awful, the humiliation she suffered at the hands of the bus driver stung her more. She still hears bombs, planes, and gunshots."

Barriers at the Egyptian Border

Once they negotiate the long bus journey, Sudanese refugees must contend with new challenges at the border. These include long wait times, a lack of proper shelter, medicine, and other basic services. As of mid-July, at least [120,000](#) Sudanese were stuck in Wadi Halfa and its surrounding areas because some do not have passports or visas, or their passports have expired.

Conditions

When Sudan's war started, border officials were not working regular hours due to the Eid holidays. The Egyptian consulate at Wadi Halfa, 25 km (15.5 miles) south of the border, did not open until April 25. This caused a build-up of Sudanese refugees there from the beginning. Months later, the situation at the border crossings is still chaotic. At the time of research, there were long lines of buses every day, a lack of clarity about [which line to stand](#) in, unsanitary conditions, and a lack of shade, toilets, water, food, and essential medicines. A pregnant woman told Refugees International she could not access a toilet for 24 hours during the crossing at Ashkeet/Qustul.

Passports

Another challenge is that many Sudanese who arrive at the border do not have passports or have expired passports. Foreign embassies where Sudanese applied for visas have all closed, their staff has been evacuated, and passports have been [shredded in some embassies](#). Only the main immigration office in Khartoum is authorized to issue passports, and it is now closed because of fighting that has overwhelmed the capital. Sudanese can obtain certain kinds of documentation, such as adding children to their parents' passports, but cannot obtain new passports. Meanwhile, Egyptian authorities have tightened entry rules.

Visa Requirements

Wadi Halfa hosts the Egyptian consulate that issues visas. The other option is Port Sudan, where the United Nations has its hub. Wadi Halfa is [struggling to cope](#) with the many people arriving daily to enter Egypt. Travelers report a lack of shelter, bedding, food, water, life-saving medicines, and basic supplies at Wadi Halfa. Although Egyptian officials reportedly increased the number of immigration officers and extended service hours, there is still a severe backlog on visa processing, estimated in the thousands. Frustrated with waiting, some people travel to Port Sudan, which also hosts an Egyptian consulate, and try their luck there.

Egyptian Entry Rules

Mutual suspicion has marked the Egypt-Sudan border since independence in 1956 from Anglo-Egyptian rule. A turning point in Sudan-Egypt relations was the failed [assassination](#) attempt of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa on June 27, 1995, when he attended an Organization of African Unity Summit. Egypt [blamed](#) Sudan for the assassination attempt. Following the incident, Egypt required Sudanese to obtain a [visa](#) to enter the country. Although relations seemed to thaw with the Four Freedoms Agreement in 2004, which removed entry visa requirements, the governments have not applied the agreement consistently. In April 2017, Sudan required Egyptian males [under 16 and over 50](#) to get a visa before entering the country.

Sudanese fleeing the conflict have run up against this legacy of mutual mistrust despite the agreement's existence.

At the start of the war, Egyptian authorities, with some difficulties because of the sheer size of the influx, allowed women, children, and males under 17 and over 50 years of age to enter Egypt. Those excluded had to obtain entry visas, which separated families.

On June 10, Egyptian authorities tightened the entry requirement further, requiring all Sudanese nationals to obtain a visa from the Egyptian consular office in Wadi Halfa or Port Sudan. Egypt also introduced a raft of changes that reversed the previous position and made Sudanese entry into Egypt difficult. For instance, those who enter Egypt or use Egypt as a transit country were required to obtain [security clearance](#) to be allowed to enter Egypt. Amnesty International states, “The policy specifies that the number of the security clearance has to be printed and dated on the entry visa for the individual to be allowed into [Egypt](#).” People with valid visas issued by the Khartoum Egyptian consulate and [expired passports](#) were initially allowed to enter Egypt, but that is not the case anymore. Egypt also stopped recognizing [emergency travel documents](#) if their application was lost during the war.

The net result of these policy barriers is that Sudanese will continue to be stuck at Wadi Halfa, where sanitary conditions are poor, spending their limited money on food and accommodations. Many families opt to send women, children, and elderly members ahead while others await their visas, resulting in splitting up families for uncertain periods. In late May 2023, UNHCR called on Egypt and other countries around Sudan to keep their [borders](#) open.

Inside Egypt

In Egypt, refugees face two sets of challenges, one of which revolves around registration and determination of their refugee status. The second sets of challenges are access to livelihoods and housing. Egypt hosts around 300,000 registered asylum seekers and refugees from 55 countries. The country also faces chronic economic challenges. Inflation hit a record high of 35.7 percent in June 2023. According to recent reporting, “Since March 2022, Egypt has faced a foreign currency shortage and recurrent devaluations, which have led to price increases and made life more difficult for many Egyptians, whose living standards have fallen.”

Refugee Status Determination

In Egypt, UNHCR undertakes registration, documentation, and RSDs in line with the 1954 Memorandum of Understanding between Egypt and UNHCR. Additionally, UNHCR supports “the access of refugees to health and education services and ensuring that vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers can meet their basic needs.” World Food Program (WFP) also uses the UNHCR’s refugee registration information, and other details, as eligibility criteria for food assistance through cash transfer.

Upon registering with UNHCR, an asylum seeker receives a renewable residency permit, a “Yellow Card,” from the Egyptian government. The permit protects people from being detained and deported. The card is valid for 18 months. Once UNHCR formally determines status, the refugee is given a “Blue Card.” This card is valid for three years. But getting an appointment with UNHCR is incredibly difficult for many refugees.

Many Sudanese expressed their deep frustrations with the slow processing of their status determination. Some said that getting interviews with UNHCR takes months, and even once one obtains the Yellow Card, scheduling the next phase takes a long time. It takes someone up to two years to get the Blue Card.

Others described the lack of effective communications from the UNHCR regarding the pace of registration, RSDs, and the overall asylum process. Rejection of refugees’ status, for instance, is not followed by clear explanations. “Results were posted after weeks or months on public notice boards next to anonymous case numbers. Rejected applicants were not given specific reasons, only three-letter codes such as LOC (lack of credibility) or NWP (no well-founded fear of persecution).”⁴

Many opt not to seek refugee status at all. Instead, like most Sudanese living in

4 Kagan, Michael, “Frontier Justice: Legal Aid and UNHCR Refugee Status Determination in Egypt” (2006). Scholarly Works. 634. <https://scholars.law.unlv.edu/facpub/634>

Egypt, even the most vulnerable families may opt to remain in the country as visitors renewing their residency permit every six months. In sum, the paperwork and effort required to register and obtain refugee status—and a legacy of mistreatment by [Egyptian security](#) agencies—makes the Sudanese refugee situation in Egypt extremely difficult.

The 1951 Refugee Convention is a crucial legal document regarding the definition⁵ of a refugee. The Organization of Africa Unity’s Convention Governing the Specific Aspect of Refugee Problems in Africa expands the definition of a refugee in Article 1(2) to include “every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or [nationality](#).”

In Egypt, UNHCR, instead of applying the Organization of Africa’s definition in determining refugees’ status, “**almost always relies upon the narrower definition included in the 1951 Refugee Convention.**” As a result, “rejected refugees represent most of the Sudanese refugee population in Egypt. Since 1994, when applications of Sudanese started being screened for asylum, the percentage of those rejected, especially between 1999 and 2002, reached 67 percent.”⁶ Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network in 2017 reported that some asylum seekers were granted protection under the OAU convention, witnessing a dramatic positive response. However, the “the OAU definition rarely, if ever, served as the basis for a positive RSD decision. It requires permission from the head of the [department](#).”

The UNHCR Note on the Protection of Refugees in Mass Influx Situations states individual determinations are “too unwieldy, costly, and protracted in the face of large [numbers of arrivals](#).” And considering individual RSDs is ill-suited because it is “impractical, impossible and unnecessary” in a situation of mass displacement like Sudan. UNHCR and Egyptian authorities should use the OAU convention, to which Egypt is a signatory, to grant refugee status to the Sudanese since they are fleeing “generalized violence” that has seriously disrupted the “public order.”

Part of the problem is that UNHCR has been operating under severe funding constraints for the past few years. UNHCR’s 2023 budget for Egypt is \$ \$151.4 million. Of that, they have only received only 22 percent. The result has left a gaping hole in UNHCR’s budget amid a significant crisis. Aid groups Refugees International spoke to in Cairo and said UNHCR officers had been let go because of funding cuts.

5 The Convention defines a refugee as: “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.” <https://www.unhcr.org/what-refugee#:~:text=The%201951%20Refugee%20Convention%20is,group%2C%20or%20political%20opinion.%E2%80%9D>

6 Grabska, K. (2005) ‘Living on the Margins: The Analysis of the Livelihood Strategies of Sudanese Refugees with Closed Files in Egypt.’ https://documents.aucegypt.edu/Docs/GAPP/Living_on_Margins_Final_July_2005_000.pdf

In an interview with Refugees International, UNHCR stated, despite the restricted financial environment, that it has surged its operation in Egypt following the outbreak of the Sudanese conflict. Since the conflict, 40,000 Sudanese have approached UNHCR, and of those, 20,000 have been registered.

Sudanese-led Organizations

Aside from registration and RSD, two main challenges Sudanese refugees face in Egypt are a lack of housing and access to livelihood opportunities. Since Egypt does not have refugee camps, refugees can live in urban areas and are granted freedom of movement. Many rely on humanitarian aid provided by the limited number of international aid organizations, mainly the UN agencies. The Egyptian government's restrictive and, in some cases, hostile legal, policy, and administrative environment limits the number of international humanitarian agencies in the country. The Egyptian Red Crescent is the chief national humanitarian agency through which most relief is channeled.

Despite operating on limited funding, local Sudanese-led organizations have filled the vacuum and become the lifeline for many.

These groups rely on well-wishers and function voluntarily in challenging legal and policy environments. Few of these organizations are registered, and most operate without registration because the registration requires **onerous paperwork**. The **restrictive** legal-policy environment also gives Egyptian authorities sweeping powers to deregister them.

Law No. 70 of 2017 governed the operation of non-governmental organizations in Egypt. Law No. 70 replaced the Mubarak-era **Law No.84** of 2002. After much criticism, the government replaced **Law No. 70 of 2017** with **Law No. 149** of 2019. The law, while improving the last two pieces of legislation, restricts the functioning of NGOs. For instance, under the law, NGOs can receive funding from inside and outside Egypt; however, “The Ministry of Social Solidarity must be informed of the transaction and is then given a period of 60 days to challenge the transaction, during which the money **cannot be spent**.”

For instance, in 2010, Tadamon⁷, an NGO working with refugees in Egypt, designed a program to offer anti-avian influenza vaccines to African refugees. The International

⁷ Independent, non-political network of civil society organizations working to promote the welfare of refugees and their mutual co-existence with Egyptians through networking and coordination of cooperative efforts.

Organization for Migration had agreed to fund it, “but the government’s funding approval took four months to come through. This meant that the program was no longer viable because the winter, the peak of avian influenza infections, was already over.”⁸

According to the New Humanitarian, a year later, “[UNHCR] was unable to fund another Tadamon project to offer medical support to African refugees because of difficulties related to getting funding [approvals](#).”

But not all organizations are registered like Tadamon and can be funded directly. The unregistered organizations rely on donations to provide services like housing. Schools and other facilities they run are under immense strain serving the new arrivals. They are especially short-handed when dealing with people who need specialized care, like medical conditions

Mahgoub runs a small charity center on the outskirts of Cairo. He has lived in Egypt for seven years. When Refugees International visited his center, he said his organization hosts eight families of 32 individuals, including 27 children, in a three-bedroom flat. Space and food are the most difficult challenge. They survive on donations from well-wishers.

Mahgoub’s case is only illustrative, but many Sudanese-led organizations are struggling with increasing service demands and the lack of structured funding. One medical assistant in Cairo told Refugees International that Sudanese refugees, especially those with medical conditions, ration medicine.

The [Egyptian Red Crescent](#) is the primary Egyptian authority delivering humanitarian aid with UN agencies like the WFP, which provide [direct cash](#). However, there is a massive gap between needs and their services.

8 NGOs Under Pressure in Egypt, The New Humanitarian, 5 June 2013. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2013/06/05/ngos-under-pressure-egypt>

Lack of Livelihoods

Another central challenge remains the dearth of livelihood opportunities for refugees in Egypt. While Egyptian law allows refugees access to the labor market, they face many obstacles⁹. And under the Four Agreements, Sudanese refugees are entitled to the right to work, “in any profession, craft, and other works,”¹⁰ however, there is no domestic legislation to operationalize the Four Freedom Agreement. As a result, many refugees join the informal job market, making them susceptible to being taken advantage of by employers. They also lack workplace protection. This further prevents them from seeking judicial redress, thus, creating a vicious cycle of exploitation and vulnerability.

Faris is four months old and is from Khartoum. Both his kidneys have issues. He was operated on once in Cairo and was due for an operation on his second kidney. When the conflict started, his mother and aunt fled to Egypt, but Faris’s father was left in Khartoum. The family spent all their resources on escaping and could not afford the second operation, which would cost 50,000 Egyptian pounds (just over U.S. \$1,600).

9 “Regulations stipulate that refugees may only be offered work permits if no Egyptian national is qualified for the employment opportunity.” Systemic Approach to Inclusive Markets Factsheet – Egypt, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/projectdocumentation/wcms_630907.pdf

10 <https://documents.aucegypt.edu/Docs/GAPP/Refugee-Entitlements-Report%202.0.pdf>

Conclusion

The current trajectory of the Sudan conflict is such that more Sudanese will flee to neighboring countries, including Egypt, for their safety. Instead of facilitating their entry, Egypt disregards refugee law, and the Four Freedoms agreement it signed with Sudan and has erected various entry barriers. As a result, thousands of Sudanese are stuck at or near the border in unsanitary conditions where they cannot meet their basic needs for weeks. Those who cross the border must contend with a painfully slow registration and RSD backlog by UNHCR and a less-than-welcoming environment. The net result means refugees are stuck between conflict and a hostile environment inside Egypt. Relaxation of entry and expediting the refugee determination process, combined with livelihood and labor access by the Egyptian authorities and UNHCR, will reduce the humanitarian suffering at the border and inside Egypt.

Featured Image: People fleeing war-torn Sudan cross into Egypt through the Argeen Land Port on May 12, 2023. Photo by Khaled Desouki/AFP via Getty Images.

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